

Secret Study On Tonkin Kept From Senators

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A secret study that may raise further questions about official handling of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents in 1964 is being denied an inquiring Senate committee, a just-released hearing transcript shows.

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week said he would not turn over the "critical incident report" at least until he has looked into its "reliability."

The existence of the study made for the Pentagon by the Institute for Defense Analyses, and McNamara's refusal to give it to the committee are among the main disclosures in a 110-page record of the committee's questioning of McNamara for 7½ hours behind closed doors last Tuesday.

Doubts Reflected

The record, made public last night with only minor deletions to protect secrets, covers the panel's day-long probe reflecting some senators' growing doubts about the 1964 incidents which led to the first U.S. bombing of North Vietnam.

Those incidents — some kind of contact between U.S. patrol ships and North Vietnamese vessels on Aug. 2 and 4, 1964 — also led to congressional approval of the "Gulf of Tonkin resolution" authorizing President Johnson to take "all necessary measures" to repel Asian aggression.

Besides the disclosures about the secret study, the hearing record also contains these significant revelations:

- A highly detailed chronology by McNamara of the steps he and top military men took on the afternoon of Aug. 4 to make "damned sure what happened" before recommending to President Johnson that the United States retaliate.

Wheeler Statement

- A brief hint, not entirely clear in its meaning, that one hour after the reprisal bombing order went out, a top Navy officer still was trying to resolve doubts that two U.S. destroyers had been attacked.

- A statement by the nation's highest military officer, Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, that "to the best of my knowledge and belief during that period (summer, 1964) the report was correct."

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1964) there was no thought of extending the war into the North in the sense of our participation in such actions, activities."

- McNamara's comment that he doesn't believe he saw a draft of the proposed congressional resolution which State Department officials drew up even before the Tonkin incidents.

- The secretary's repeated attempts to discount the one previously secret message which most committee members think is the most damaging to McNamara's case — the on-the-scene Navy officer's report that many assault reports "appear doubtful."

- Insistence by McNamara that offshore spying was not the "primary" mission of the destroyers involved, the Maddox and the Turner Joy. But McNamara did disclose that the type of intelligence they gathered led U.S. officials to order, two or three months later, a larger sea patrol—nicknamed "Market Time"—off North Vietnam's shores.

McNamara Views

- Attempts by McNamara to dismiss, as "sheer speculation, unfounded speculation," another on-the-scene message from the destroyer force commander, suggesting he saw the Aug. 4 attack that North Vietnam considered itself threatened by the U.S. patrol.

- Refusal by the secretary to concede that the destroyer patrol was used as a "decoy" to draw North Vietnamese patrol boats away from South Vietnamese assault craft attacking North-held islands. He also argued that "every reasonable effort" was made to avoid provoking the North.

- A description by McNamara of the differences which high officials saw in the need to retaliate against the Tonkin incidents, while acting with restraint this year when North Korea seized the intelligence ship USS Pueblo. In the hearing was made, the secretary said, for "one of the sections of the Joint Staff on certain procedures and operations that that section was interested in."

- Gen. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, went on to describe the analysis as "not a study" but rather a "critical incident report," one of a series of such reports to aid in "improving our staff procedures."

- Although the record of testimony does not indicate exactly why the committee wants the study, it is understood that some senators and staff members consider it potentially very revealing as the one collection of the military records on the Gulf of Tonkin incidents.

- The committee chairman, Sen. J. William Fulbright, D-Ark., said the panel had information that the report "includes the text of communications between President Johnson and Admiral (U.S.G.) Sharp and others during the period when the critical decisions were made."

'Not Put-Up Job'

- At one point in the hearing, Sen. Wayne Morse, D-Ore., read portions of an anonymous letter he said the committee had received describing the institute report. One part of the letter read as follows:

"The Tonkin Gulf incident,

on the basis of which the resolution was so quickly obtained, was not a put-up job. But it was not the inexcusable and flagrant attack upon U.S. ships that it seemed to be, and that would have justified the resolution and retaliation had there been so.

"It was a confused bungle which was used by the President to justify a general course of action and policy that he had been advised by the military to follow. He, like the secretary of defense, was a prisoner. He got from them all the critical and decisive information and misinformation and he simply put his trust in the wrong people."

After Morse offered the letter, McNamara said he "would assume the committee would want to expose" the "grave charges" made in it, "but I can't refute people who are faceless accusers. I know some of the statements in the letter are absolutely false."

Denies Talks Taped

For example, the secretary said, the letter was wrong in saying that there were tapes of his conversations with the President.

The committee's staff insists it does not know who wrote the letter.

The institute report which it mentions was written, Wheeler said, by a man named "Ponturo" who worked at the institute.

Both the general and McNamara said they had not yet read the report in its entirety. McNamara described it as a "thick document." Both were critical of it.

The secretary said it "raises a lot of questions," one of which is the fact that the report does not have a high enough security classification "to indicate that it covers all of the intelligence information which contributed significantly to our conclusion that an attack took place."

'Errors of Fact'

Wheeler, who said he had "read maybe a half dozen pages," said he had found "errors of fact and I believe omissions that would be pertinent to any definitive study of the operation."

When Fulbright asked McNamara if he would object to having the committee invite the report's author to testify, the secretary replied:

"I don't know Ponturo. I never heard of him. I haven't the faintest idea what his qualifications are. I know nothing about the man and, hence, I am reluctant to say we concur in his appearance."

He turned down Fulbright's request for the study — a request rejected earlier by other Pentagon officials. McNamara said: "Any report we have, you have access to, but only after it has been properly reviewed as to its reliability."

John Ponturo, a staff member of the institute, said in a telephone interview that he was the "project leader" for the study. He said it was classified "top secret," and thus he could not say whether the report confirmed or supported any of the doubts some senators hold about the Tonkin incidents. "I can't say anything about the report at all," he said.

Ponturo said he had not been in contact with the Foreign Relations Committee.

As several senators had indicated publicly earlier in the week, McNamara's responses to

their questions did not settle all their doubts about what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin, and in the highest-level government offices here.

For example, Sen. Albert Gore, D-Tenn., said flatly near the hearing's end: "I do not think, Mr. Secretary, the second attack (that is, on Aug. 4) has been established by your testimony today at all."

Gore, joined by other senators, also was unconvinced that the incidents — whatever their character — justified the retaliation the United States carried out the night following the Aug. 4 encounter.

"I think that from my tentative conclusion it is that the administration was hasty, acted precipitately, inadvisably, unwisely, out of proportion to the provocation in launching the 64 bombing attacks on North Vietnam out of a confused, uncertain situation on a murky night."

At one point, when McNamara had produced a North Vietnamese bullet taken off one of the destroyers, Gore sarcastically replied: "You hold one bullet and we sent 64 ships in retaliation." He made clear he was talking about the 64 air strikes made by 59 fighter bombers.

Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., said he agreed with Gore. Pell described the scope of the retaliation as "almost infinity from the viewpoint of the damage we suffered."

Response 'Appropriate'

Throughout the hearing, however, McNamara insisted — as he did in replying to Pell — that the U.S. response was "controlled, limited and quite appropriate."

McNamara attempted to explain to the senators why the United States had retaliated with bombs after the Tonkin incident, but had made no military attack after the Pueblo was seized by North Korea on Jan. 23 of this year.

He said the "major difference" was that in 1964 North Vietnam "was infiltrating several thousand armed personnel a year" into South Vietnam, and that was not true in Korea. Moreover, he said, North Korea was not carrying out direct armed attacks upon "the people and the political institutions of South Korea" to the "same extent" that North Vietnam was doing against South Vietnam.

The defense secretary's testimony, in one key exchange with Fulbright, provided very specific details of the timing of messages to and from Washington and of the steps leading toward the decision to bomb in reprisal.

As he recited the times, McNamara indicated that almost all of the reports from the scene raising doubts about an attack on the destroyers had come in, and were resolved, in advance of the issuance of the President's order to attack in response.

Order Released

The last time the secretary listed was 6:07 p.m., Washington time, on Aug. 4. At that point he said, Adm. Sharp, then U.S. commander in the Pacific—called in to say "he was fully assured the attack took place."

McNamara then was "convinced that it had, and I released the executive order on the strike." That order had been drawn up tentatively earlier in the afternoon, the secretary said. But he stressed that he had told Sharp during the day "that under no circumstances would retaliatory action take place until we were, to use my words, 'damned sure that the attack had taken place.'"

The only evidence contained in the hearing record that some doubt may have lingered after 6:07 p.m. is a report—cited only briefly by Gore—that Adm. Thomas H. Moorer at 7:06 p.m. had cabled the destroyers asking for "immediate confirmation of the earlier attack on them." McNamara said this was "simply a response" to an earlier inquiry. Sharp had wanted made, which he got answered through other means.

It is understood, however, that the committee has other messages in its files which also show efforts in the evening by U.S. military men to clear up doubts about the incidents.

At frequent points throughout the hearing record, McNamara is shown to be trying to write off the importance of a message sent in, around 1:30 p.m. on

that day (Washington time) by the destroyer group commander, Capt. John J. Herrick. It said:

"Review of action makes many recorded contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. Freak weather effects and over eager sonar men may have accounted for many reports. No actual visual sightings by (destroyer) Maddox. Suggest complete evaluation before any further action."

The secretary emphasized that Herrick had not said there was no attack. He also said that a "complete evaluation" was made before retaliation. And, finally, McNamara said that, an hour and 20 minutes after the first message, Herrick notified his Pacific commander "that he was certain that the original ambush was bona fide."